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and Caterina Pasqualino. Bloomsbury: London & New York.
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Experimental Film and Anthropology by Arnd Schneider
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Laura Coppens

This rather thin book, which is the outcome of a major international conference¹, organized by Arnd Schneider and Catarina Pasqualino, can be seen in line with Schneider's greater project of exploring the relationship between contemporary art and anthropology (see Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010, 2013). It is not surprising then that the underlying argument of *Experimental Film and Anthropology* is similar to the one made in the aforementioned publications, in that, the editors call on anthropologists to engage with experimental film practices, because "it is through practice, beyond words, that theoretical arguments are brought forward which are of genuine interest to anthropology" (p. 18). The volume at hand is a welcome and long-overdue addition to Catherine Russell's formative book *Experimental Ethnography* (1999), where she approaches the links between experimental and ethnographic film through cultural critique and textual analysis.

One of the aims of *Experimental Film and Anthropology*, as stated in the opening chapter of the same name, is the subversion of the "realist-narrative paradigm" that, in the editors' view, has dominated the field of audio-visual anthropology far too long. The call for reform of conventional anthropological film practices subscribes to a renewed dismissal of observational cinema, which is in need of a "radical shock therapy," as Suhr and Willerslev argue in their recently published volume *Transcultural Montage* (2013). They further play with this idea in a lively yet unfortunately little stimulating discussion of montage (Ch. 5) in the current publication.

Although I very much welcome the proposition of a broader notion of reality, Schneider and Pasqualino would have done better to have taken into account Anna Grimshaw's (2013:231) suggestion to "identify the Bazinian character of observational cinema and consider the nature of its radical intervention." For example, by drawing our attention to a recent installation work by Lucien Castaing-Taylor and identifying its shared cinematic aesthetic with Italian neorealist cinema, Grimshaw convincingly argues that contemporary observational practices are very well a mode of experimental anthropology.

That the innovative work of Harvard's Sensory Ethnography Lab (SEL), founded by Castaing-Taylor in 2006, is merely mentioned in a footnote and

1 New Visions: Experimental Film, Art and Anthropology at the Musée du quai Branly, Paris 2012

is not given further attention in a text that proclaims to explore and advance experimentations in visual anthropology practices is a considerable shortcoming in this volume. The much celebrated (at least outside academia) immersive multi-sensorial and aesthetic qualities of films like *Leviathan* (2012) and more recently *Manakamana* (2013) not only mirror a renewed concern of phenomenology and the senses within anthropology but also are examples par excellence for the innovative application of formal devices (e.g. structural techniques and installation) explored by experimental filmmakers like James Benning, Peter Hutton, and Sharon Lockhart. In fact, as MacDonald (2014:24) suggests, the SEL works are a perfect instance of “avant-docs,” as they join “documentary subject matter with a level of formal experiment usually understood as avant-garde.”

Whereas the SEL embraces a multi-sensory approach, the impetus bringing together the collection of essays in this cross-disciplinary anthology is foremost visual experimentation, thereby stressing the status of (analog) film as material object. Among the eleven contributions covering a vast spectrum of poetic and aesthetic cinematic practices that range from photofilm and animation to interactive digital compositions there is only one that explicitly goes beyond this ocularcentrism.

In their thought-provoking essay (Ch. 7), Jennifer Heusen and Kevin Allen, re-think the relation between sight and hearing by exploring critical approaches to sound and image in their own filmmaking practice, arguing for an “asynchronic ethnography” that, in comparison to non-synch or synch cinematic practices, better reveals “the fragmented, asynchronous nature of experience itself” (p. 120). In fact, the authors critique the conceptual and practical distinction made between synchronous and non-synchronous cinematic techniques and representations, that is, the separation between sound and sight. With their concept of “asynchronicity” they propose a third modality, one that moves between “sync” and “non-sync” filmmaking techniques. Heusen and Allen reference Jean Rouch’s film *Jaguar*, in which asynchronicity shapes the entire time-space of the film, as inspirational to their experimental ethnographic practice. At the same time, they distance themselves from the sensory ethnographies of the SEL, above all *Leviathan*, which has been critiqued by anthropologists for its anti-humanistic or post-humanistic stance (see e.g. MacDonald 2014, 410). Instead, it is the stated aim of Heusen and Allen to link the sensory and the representational in order to arrive at “sensory politics” (p. 127), emphasizing their interest in people, politics, and aesthetics. Asynchronicity, they argue, is both aesthetic and political and therefore particularly suitable to disrupt, what they call, the “sedimented styles” or conventional ethnographic filmmaking practices (e.g. synchronized time and space) of visual anthropology. For their asynchronic practices they prefer to work with a Super 8 mm camera, often using the length of the film reel as structuring device. Without fetishizing vintage technologies – indeed

asynchronous practices are also possible with DSLR cameras – the authors particularly value the limitations of this specific cinematic apparatus and the materiality of analog film, because they comment on the artificial nature of the filmic process.

Another contribution that foregrounds the materiality of 8mm film is Martino Nicoletti's exploration (Ch. 10) of "visual media primitivism." Nicoletti, like Heusen and Allen, understands old analog visual media as a mode of political resistance. Introducing yet another provisional term, "poetic ethnography," to describe an evolving imbrication of experimental film and anthropology, he reflects on his multimedia artwork at the center of which lies the black-and-white cine-poem on Kayan women in Thailand, *I must not Look you in the Eyes: The Zoo of the Giraffe Women* (2011). In the cine-poem, he strategically employs the lack of visual information characteristic of Super 8 images and combines it with a poetic text and a specifically created soundtrack for the purpose of challenging the viewer's expectations and stereotypical assumptions. With his experimental work then, Nicoletti has the desire to create "conceptual distance" (p. 174) between the images of the Kayan women and the observer, critically disengaging from the voyeuristic and exploitative tourist gaze.

Alongside the politics of form, another important area of experimental film discussed in the volume is its relation to memory. Alyssa Grossman's innovative approach to explore the topic of memory in her anthropological documentary production is particularly interesting (Ch. 8). Like in her earlier work, Grossman employs specific cinematic techniques like stop-motion animation to disrupt linear narratives and to elicit memories. For the film *Memory Objects, Memory Dialogues* (2011), which Grossman created in collaboration with the visual artist Selena Kimball, she makes use of material objects from socialist times in Romania to stir imagination and trigger memories in her interlocutors and at the same stimulate remembrance in the film's makers and spectators alike. The filmmakers use a dual-screen installation, juxtaposing ethnographic interviews with the now animated objects, to properly deal with and convey "memory's generative, constantly evolving qualities" (p. 136).

In an equally inspiring essay, Arnd Schneider examines the often-overlooked hybrid genre of "photofilm" to think about issues of temporality and memory (Ch. 2). Using three selected examples, Schneider carves out different modalities of photofilm, such as its use as a research tool in the work of anthropologist John Haviland. Indeed, the author is particularly interested in the practical and theoretical potentials of photofilm for anthropological research. He argues that the "reanimation" of still images in moving sequences allows the spectator to look more precisely as individual scenes stay longer than in conventional films and at the same time reveal more information, through movement and sound, than a single image.

The least stimulating sections of the book are those that focus on the practice of an individual artist as they tend to remain overly descriptive and therefore lack in theoretical depth. For example, Nicole Brenez's essay on Robert Fenz's film oeuvre (Ch. 4) is rather disappointing, especially because it is written in an elliptical and little accessible manner. In chapter 6, Kathryn Ramey writes about the camera-less animation work of Robert Ascher and provides a brief history of this particular practice. Although his cinematic oeuvre surely merits more scholarly attention within our discipline, we would also benefit if Ramey – an anthropologist and experimental filmmaker working with animation – would discuss her own use of various direct animation techniques, perhaps in relationship to Ascher's work.²

The volume *Experimental Film and Anthropology* is yet another call for more experimentation in the field of visual anthropology with the aim to consider new possibilities in audio-visual media research and representation and ultimately revive anthropological documentary. Unfortunately, these suggestions for reform are still confined to the conventional distinction between experimental filmmaking and ethnographic film. Perhaps it would be more fruitful for future publications to defy these old categories altogether, since, in my view, they no longer make sense today, and instead be engaged with innovative work in “the evolving liminal zone between documentary and avant-garde” (MacDonald 2014:16). Nevertheless, it is a welcome book that serves as a point of departure for a more forward-moving and hopeful sub-discipline. In sum, although some of the contributions disappoint with a lack of new perspectives, others are more stimulating and insightful, serving as appropriate readings in advanced audio-visual and media anthropology classes.

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² Kathryn Ramey discusses her latest experimental film work PLUTO in this edition of Ethnoscripts.

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